



## **Life at Gronant Little Tern Colony** *By Wendy Williams, Little Tern Warden*

For three months during the summer a small stretch of shingle on the North Wales Coast is taken over by African visitors. This habitat, located in the Gronant Local Nature Reserve on the Denbighshire-Flintshire boarder is the last remaining Welsh breeding ground for Britain's rarest sea bird, the little tern. In order for the birds to continue to use the beach for breeding, Denbighshire Countryside Services provide around the clock protection.

I have been employed as a full time warden at the little tern colony for past two years and throughout the breeding season either myself and my colleagues, Andy Farrel or Tom Hiles can be found in the dunes at Gronant. Our day to day responsibilities involve talking to visitors, carrying out maintenance on the electric fences but more importantly, keeping an eye out for predators and helping the little terns to defend their young.

Even with our help the terns have to continually fight for survival. A pair of kestrels have nested near to the colony for several years and they are precise and persistent predators, sometimes taking several chicks a day to feed their young. Crows, gulls, and foxes are also a continual threat but possibly the most worrying threat comes from the sea when the spring tides threaten to wash away nests.

Just before the chicks are due to hatch, we count nests and eggs in order to get an idea of the colony's breeding success from year to year and later in the season some chicks will be ringed in order to track the movements of the colony. Shortly before the little terns are due to make their 4000 mile journey back to Guinea Bissau on the west coast of Africa we will count the fledgling and this number will be the measure of year's breeding success.



Every day is different working with these beautiful little birds. I feel very privileged as I walk along the beach at sun rise with the Terns feeding and pairing all around me. It is sad to think that once little terns would have nested all along the North Wales coast but today they are limited to this small area of beach at Gronant. I am very proud of the time and hard work of the volunteers who help to manage the colony, for without their dedication, project funding from Denbighshire County Council and the Bourne Leisure Group plc, Wales would surely lose these charismatic birds.

If you are interested in volunteering for countryside services and help the little terns, please contact Adrian Hibbert on [adrian.hibbert@denbighshire.gov.uk](mailto:adrian.hibbert@denbighshire.gov.uk).



### Ringed plover in Conwy

We hardly believed the reports that came in last year of a pair of ringed plovers trying to nest on one of the busiest beaches in the county of Conwy – Pensarn Beach near Abergele. This beach is a Site of Special Scientific Interest for its shingle ridge and is managed by Conwy County Borough Council's Countryside Service. Surely no birds would try to nest on this very popular beach, surrounded by cafes and amusement arcades, children and dog walkers? It would only take one inquisitive dog to distract or chase away the adults and a nearby herring gull could take the eggs in an instant.

So, in case they came back this year, Conwy County Borough Council's Countryside Service hatched a plan (sorry, bad pun!). Sure enough, a pair of ringed plovers came back earlier this year to the same location. Once we saw the territorial behaviour, we cordoned off that area and put notices up asking people to keep away. The fencing had to be temporary and to be able to be put up without too much disturbance to the birds so we didn't put up secure dog-proof fencing but relied on people's good will to keep themselves and their dogs out of the roped-off area. Luckily the area was also within a dog control area in which people were prohibited from taking their dogs in the summer, so we also had the assistance of one of the staff from the Harbours and Maritime team to remind visitors to keep their dogs away. We had a lot of support and local people often stopped us to ask for updates on the birds. Most people hadn't seen the birds as they have incredibly effective camouflage and can be impossible to spot when on a nest.

Both the male and the female ringed plover take it in turns to incubate the eggs. The other adult keeps nearby and provides a distraction if people approach the nest – you may have seen the remarkable 'broken wing' behaviour that they sometimes exhibit to lure predators away from the nest. So we nervously monitored the nest...



After about three and a half weeks of incubation, we were relieved to receive a report from Brian of three downy chicks running about with the adults.

Young ringed plovers are 'precocial' so they are able to run around as soon as they are hatched which makes them a bit safer in such a well-visited environment. Their downy feathers are not suitable for flying until they have fledged about 3 and a half weeks later so the adults keep a close eye on them and alert them to danger. Fortunately, all three chicks were still seen with their parents weeks after hatching.

It is easy to see why these birds are under threat with their coastal breeding locations subject to disturbance and development pressure. The number of breeding ringed plovers has declined worryingly in recent years so that it is now on the amber list of birds in Wales and it is also a species that Local Authorities in Wales have a legal duty to consider. It was really rewarding to help just one pair of these birds and demonstrate that wildlife can co-exist with us even on a busy tourist beach! Throughout the nesting season, we had the invaluable support of some very keen volunteers who visited the area frequently to keep us informed of developments. A big thank you to them!



**The Big Butterfly Count 2012** *By Matthew Jones, Student at Maes Garmon, Mold*

***When?*** Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> July – Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2012

The **Big Butterfly Count** is a nationwide survey aimed at helping us assess the health of our environment. It was launched in 2010 and an impressive 10,000 people took part, counting 210,000 butterflies and day-flying moths across the nation. Many more people, some 34,000 in fact, joined the Big Butterfly Count 2011.

**Why count butterflies** Butterflies react very quickly to change in their environment which makes them excellent biodiversity indicators. Butterfly declines are an early warning for other wildlife losses. That's why counting butterflies can be described as taking the pulse of nature. The count will also assist us in identifying trends in species that will help us plan how to protect butterflies from extinction, as well as understand the effect of climate change on wildlife.

**How to take part** Simply count butterflies for 15 minutes during bright (preferably sunny) weather during the **big butterfly count**. We have chosen this time of year because most butterflies are at the adult stage of their lifecycle, so more likely to be seen. Records are welcome from anywhere: from parks, school grounds and gardens, to fields and forests.



Butterflies conjure up images of sunshine, the warmth and colour of flowery meadows, and summer gardens teeming with life. A butterfly is mainly a day-flying insect, of the order Lepidoptera, which includes the butterflies and moths. They have large, distinctive, and often brightly coloured wings, and conspicuous, fluttering flight. They have two pairs of scaly wings and two segmented, clubbed antennae. Like all insects, they have a three-part body; head, thorax, abdomen. Each butterfly has three pairs of jointed legs, compound eyes and a segmented exoskeleton.

Some butterflies are generalists, able to exist in a wide variety of habitats. The adults can feed on nectar from a wide range of flowers, and the caterpillars are able to feed on the leaves of several different types of plants. Most butterflies however are far more specialised, each species having its own particular requirements regarding habitats, temperature, humidity, larval foodplants and adult food sources.

There are **52** different species of butterflies that are present in the UK around July every year. The 'Gatekeeper' was the most common butterfly overall in 2011, with an estimated 52,368 of them present in the UK. The 'Small White', 'Large White' and 'Meadow Brown' were other very common butterflies. Here in **Wales**, there is some variation. The list below shows the **top five species**: 1. Large White 2. Meadow Brown 3. Small White 4. Gatekeeper 5. Green-veined White.

To find out more about taking part visit <http://www.bigbutterflycount.org/>

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